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ABSTRACT

This Digest details how one professor of public relations has developed and put into practice a class in "cyberspace." The Digest first provides background on online communication techniques and the explosion of online teaching at the university level, and then tells how a professor, with the help of a summer grant from her university, developed her course in public relations campaigns. The largest section of the Digest describes the false starts in choosing an online system that was compatible and comfortable for both students and teacher and how the solution was reached which allowed for effective teaching and learning in a virtual environment. The Digest concludes by listing problems, benefits, and positive outcomes of the experience in cyberspace. (NKA)

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Cyberspace Class: Rewards and Punishments

by Barbara R. Shoemake

Writing for online publications has become a staple in the public relations tool belt, alongside producing press releases, corporate newsletters and videos, brochures, and annual reports. Companies and organizations are scrambling for communicators who can produce web pages, strategists who can surf the Internet and identify issues and trends, and practitioners who can position their clients in a dramatically changing communication environment.

Professional and trade journals in the public relations/organizational communication field are packed with features, predictions, and how-to articles concerning online communication. Because of the foundations of the Internet environment, academicians are on the cutting edge of this communication revolution. With the addition of online academic journals, university presence on the World Wide Web is increasing.

Online Communication Techniques

As a teacher of public relations (PR) and newswriting theory and skills, I feel that it is my obligation to provide future practitioners with knowledge of online communication techniques. This Digest will recount how I conduct my class in cyberspace.

For two years, I have required each of my students to communicate with me via electronic mail, to discuss public relations and media topics on newsgroups created for each class I teach, and to include online sources in their research papers. These requirements are met with some opposition at first, especially from students who do not own their own computers. However, by the third or fourth week of the semester, almost all of the students have surpassed me in what they know about the Internet. The typical student does not stop at my requirements, but continues to use online communication strategies to learn more about online public relations, to meet public relations students at other universities, and, of course, to play games and chat.

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Electronic mail and the use of newsgroups are now standard communication techniques for my students and me, as they are for faculty and students worldwide.

Access to Classes

As an assistant professor in a small department of journalism, my job includes recruiting and retaining students. One avenue we take to make our program more attractive, especially to an increasingly non-traditional student population, is to provide greater access to classes, either by offering night and weekend classes to those who are employed full time, or by taking the university to the student. By this I mean, of course, correspondence-type courses, independent studies, interactive video networking, and online offerings.

So what does an energetic assistant professor who needs summer money and a better research record do? She or he applies for a summer research grant. My particular grant proposal was funded, and I spent the summer of 1995 investigating the possibility of going a step further in providing online course content to students. I wanted to know what other universities were doing and how I could further incorporate this communication medium in my classes.

Dramatic Increase of Online Teaching

Online teaching dramatically increased in every discipline in 1995. A student can earn master's and doctoral degrees almost completely online. Students in these degree programs take courses via the Internet, but are required in some cases to appear in bodily form for the introductory sessions and for final exams. Course offerings through the Internet or through another online service provider like CompuServe, America Online, or Prodigy, are as diverse as the means by which they are offered. Some are accessible through electronic mail only. Other courses meet online in virtual classrooms. Some are Web-based, meaning they are accessible through "hot spots" on a Web page.

After the summer of investigation, I decided to attempt teaching in a virtual environment during the fall semester 1995, using my PR campaigns class which consists of seniors and graduate students.

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The class met at 8 A.M.--now I don't know about anyone else, but I don't have great success with students showing up for a lecture class this early. When they do show, they are late. The class in question has heavy reading assignments and requires lectures and discussion.

I knew what I wanted to test–the effectiveness and benefits of teaching in a virtual environment–but I didn't know how to go about doing it. So I enlisted assistance from the academic computing experts and, after much direction, began the fall semester by scheduling time for my class to meet in a computer lab for two weeks.

"Our" Virtual Environment

The director of academic computing at my university suggested that I attempt to teach in an environment called a "MOO." A MOO is a Multi-User Dimension Object Oriented Environment. Well, my students and I turned out to be very, very poor MOOers. We were more like Little Bo Peep's sheep. We would gather in the computer lab, telnet to a place called Diversity University, and attempt to enter the virtual campus, find the building we were supposed to be in, and enter the room established for our classes.

A computer science professor suggested I use an internet relay channel (IRC), accessible on campus. Following a couple of wasted class periods MOOing, we started using an IRC for class meetings, which turned out to be the perfect virtual environment for us.

A few more days in the lab environment and we were set. I released the students to find their own way to log in to the class after the third week. Of the 15 students in this course, six had computers either at home or in their offices on campus from which they took the course. The other class members showed up at labs on campus and logged on.

We gathered online for each class meeting until the midpoint in the semester when the work on our PR campaign increased. The 15 class members and I discussed the possibility of going back to a "real" classroom for one meeting a week. Now the reason for returning to the classroom was because the students requested it. I suggested having committee meetings online after class for work on the campaign, which the students agreed with. But the students told me they missed seeing each other. They said they felt disconnected from their classmates in the virtual environment. So, we started meeting one day a week in our regular classroom and the other two days online until the end of the semester.

Objectives; Problems

My objectives for this endeavor were: (1) to provide PR students with experience in online communication; (2) to investigate the need for providing courses online to students in the PR program; (3) to effectively communicate the course content online. Some of the problems we encountered were: (1) not all students own their own computers; (2) not all students with computers have modems; (3) few PR students were Internet savvy; (4) students wanted to chat a lot before we got started each day. But then, they do that before my "real" classes begin also.

Positive Outcomes

The positive outcomes of this experiment were that students: (1) could learn more about online communication; (2) were required to be prepared to discuss the readings for each day's class; (3) were all on the same level: those who are quietest in class are not the quietest online. When I do this again, I plan to limit the class to 15 students–even fewer would be better. And students outside the commuting area should be provided with online course offerings.

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